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ABSTRACT

True learning requires that students "make meaning" for themselves, but the patterns of verbal behavior that prevail in secondary classrooms tend to stifle rather than facilitate this process. Excerpts from tape recordings of lessons in three secondary classrooms show that, whereas the teachers display great autonomy and control over what they say, student speech is constantly being channeled and limited by the teachers, and that it is the teachers rather than the students who get practice in making meaning. Although teachers may assume that their own understandings will transfer to students, in fact students may be confused by attempting to understand preformed meanings that are presented to them; they need to make a subject meaningful for themselves by talking it through in much the same way teachers do. One tape excerpt transcript reveals a teacher's attempt to permit students to develop their own meanings, as well as her anxiety about losing control of the lesson. Although it is not easy for teachers to achieve an affective and appropriate balance between personal and social speech in the classroom, it is important that they become more aware of the ways language is used in their classrooms. (GW)

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LANGUAGE AND SECONDARY SCHOOLING: THE STRUGGLE FOR MEANING

A Paper Presented at the
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Language and Secondary Schooling: The Struggle for Meaning

Intrinsic to the notion of teaching is that what we do as teachers affects our students' learning. Consequently, we spend considerable energy preparing daily plans and yearly programs. We pursue relevance, we try to be innovative, and we try not to forget the basics. We study our subjects and the psychology of our students. We carefully choose curriculum materials. We expend enormous energy, but in preparing to teach, and in teaching, we tend to overlook an aspect of our behavior that significantly affects our students' learning: our use of language in the classroom.

We tend to take our own verbal behavior and to a lesser degree that of our students for granted. The fact is that language so permeates the classroom that we seem unable to focus on it. Almost everything that goes on in a classroom is shaped, expressed, and reflected by our use of language. Yet, because language is so pervasive and at the same time so habitual, and except where recorded, so fleeting we tend to act as though we were unaware of the inextricable relationships between the use of language in our classrooms and our students' learning.

A key for us to beginning to understand those relationships is implicit in E. M. Forester's phrase, "only connect". Teachers try to "connect" with students by what they say so that their inner worlds of experience somehow make sense and become a part of the students' experience. Students struggle with the words of the teacher and the subject trying to "connect" with both so that the subject can become full of meaning for them. The conduit between their experience and the experience of the teacher and the subject matter is their own thinking

process. Although there is prelinguistic thought, when the subject is or becomes to any degree abstract, language must interact with thought in order to make the connection between the inner world of the student and the outer world of the teacher and the subject matter. The key to making meaning for the student is that somehow that language must be their own.

Try as they may, teachers can not make meaning for students. Meaning can not be passively received or adopted. The meaning that is inherent in words is a socially agreed upon meaning. Teachers tend to assume that if they speak words whose socially accepted meaning is clear that there will be little problem for students in making the connection between those socially agreed upon meanings and personal meaningfulness. But that vital connection can never be assumed. For words to be full of meaning their conventional meanings must be infused by the personal experience and thought of the student. Teachers can try to facilitate, encourage, support, and guide that crucial connecting process, but they can not do it for the student. Making meaning requires that the students connect their inner personal world of motivation and thought with the outer social world which they perceive and experience. Learning requires that, in the end, students make meaning for themselves.

The rhetoric of secondary schooling urges students to think for themselves, to speak and write meaningfully. The patterns of verbal behavior that actually prevail in secondary classrooms are those of teacher dominance. They tend to stifle rather than facilitate students' making meaning for themselves. It is through actual language use, either speaking or writing, that students are able to make the connection between their inner, personal worlds and the external world of the

teacher and the subject matter. To make those connections effectively, students must talk and write a great deal more and in a way qualitatively different from what tends to prevail in secondary classrooms. Studies of language behavior in secondary classrooms (see A.A. Bellack, 1966, and Douglas Barnes, 1969) indicate that the most direct way in which teachers dominate the process of making meaning is that they talk the most. They control the process of making meaning by trying to do most of it themselves and by controlling fairly rigidly students' attempts to do so. Bellack's study indicates that the ratio of teachers' speech to that of students is approximately three to one.

Moreover, Barnes's study indicates that teachers rather rigorously control the quality of speech in the classroom. He indicates that the major tone imposed on speech in the classroom is formal, objective, substantive. Students are urged to adopt the language of the subject and schooling and to avoid the personal language of the self, a practice that is sure to at least inhibit and perhaps conflict with the process of students making meaning for themselves.

The tapes we obtained of secondary classrooms* yield results consistent with those of Barnes and Bellack. Teachers in the classrooms we studied do most of the talking. Their talk is most often directed at the entire class and less frequently at individual members of the class. Most of their talk is an attempt to present meaning and to evaluate its understanding. To do that, teachers are constantly structuring, explaining, clarifying, questioning and judging.

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*We obtained our recordings by asking teachers in an urban high school to make audio tapes of their classes in progress. We were not present while any of the recordings were made, and we obtained tapes of all or part of nine different classes. Certainly, that sample is limited by size and by the fact that it contains only the classes of those teachers in one school who chose to comply with our request. Still, the tapes and subsequent transcripts illuminate our understanding of teacher dominance of classroom language patterns.

The teachers represented on our tapes tend to speak in paragraphs or even sequences of paragraphs. Whereas the teachers tend to display considerable autonomy and control over what they say, student speech is constantly being channeled and shaped by the teacher. Students' verbal behavior is much more limited than that of teachers. They are basically responders rather than initiators. They tend to speak in fragments, sometimes in sentences, and very rarely in paragraphs. They direct their speech most often towards the teacher and very seldom towards their peers. They answer questions but they ask surprisingly few, and when they ask a question it may be a significant classroom event.

Our tapes indicate that the teachers we studied, like the ones cited by Barnes and Bellack do most of the meaning making in the classroom. Because teachers talk a lot, they get a lot of practice in making meaning in secondary classrooms. The students on the other hand get considerable practice in making meaning of the fact of teacher dominance of that process. What they seem to get the least practice in is in making meaning of the subject matter for themselves. For students, this process may go underground, buried by the dominance of teacher talk and expressed in the ambiguity of student silence. Sometimes it rises to the surface and expresses itself in conflict with the teachers attempt to impose meaning.

What follows are three progressively longer excerpts from the tapes we obtained which illustrate the patterns of verbal behavior we have discussed. The first transcript which follows is a brief part of a forty minute eleventh grade English class lesson during which words that have been assigned for homework, as an exercise in using the dictionary, are being discussed.

Teacher--Number 6, obsolete.

Several students--no longer in use.

T--No longer in use....

Student--Only one.

T--'Out of date,' probably'll cover the thing best. So, for example, uh, the reason 'no longer in use' wouldn't necessarily fits is... if you take something like a biplane, an antique from World War I, they still have them, they're bought, and if you take care of the thing properly, and get a mechanic who knows what he's doing, and if you can either find, or you can make the spare parts, which some people do, you can still use 'em. They are in use. But they're really out of date. I mean, uh, no matter how far down the line your National Guard base happens to be in terms of priority, you're not going to find a spud (?) lying around on the field for training purposes. So, something is out of date, a uh, all right, a Model A Ford is obsolete, but it's still fun to have. You can still find them in working condition. But, on the other hand, you really wouldn't use it as a regular car for getting around. So something that's out of date, past its time, is obsolete.

Uh, number 7, sibling.

S--Offsprings of parents.

The comments by students in this excerpt are representative of what they say throughout the entire transcript. Students speak in sentence fragments; there is no connecting or developing of ideas in what they say. The long paragraph developed by the teacher, however, does provide such connections. His paragraph is a well-integrated sequence. Two main strands of thought are logically developed, one moving from the concept 'obsolete' to the synonym 'out of date' which is then illustrated by the examples of a biplane and a Model A Ford; intertwined with that line of thought is another showing why 'no longer in use' is an acceptable, but not quite as accurate, second synonym for the same concept. The teacher is developing a subtle distinction in meanings for the word 'obsolete' and, at the same time, joining those meanings, by 'necessarily' (line 6) and by 'But, on the other hand' (line 17).

That teacher-delivered paragraph illustrates how language works to make meaning. Stated simply, we can say that words are used to refer to reality and to connect those references into patterns. In that way, the abstract concept represented by 'obsolete' becomes real: the teacher connects that word to tangible things, the biplane and the Ford. The concept is tied to particular percepts, just as the concepts of 'using' and 'not using' (line 18, for example) are traceable to the perceptible sound of the student voices (lines 2 and 3).

Beside making meaning, though, the teacher is doing something else. He is assuming that by presenting meaning to his students, they will be more able to make meaning for themselves. If we examine that assumption in terms of how the teacher himself arrived at meaning, we find that it is untenable. For the teacher, the word 'obsolete' took on meaning by becoming attached to perceptible aspects of his experience. That word means what it does because it represents and provides a social or

communicable label for his personal or private experience. The word has achieved meaning for the teacher because he has struggled successfully to create that match between the conventional meaning and personal experience. For his students, though, the task is more difficult, because in addition to making the word 'obsolete' mean something in terms of their experiences, they must also struggle with the teacher's presentation of a preformed meaning for that word. In trying to grapple with experience, students here first have to grapple with the teacher's way of dealing with experience.

Teachers tend to expect a smooth transfer of meaning accomplished through the connections they made with language. We have found, however, the possibility of a conflict rather than a transfer of meanings. If language works by shaping or structuring personal and private thought, feeling, and experience by matching those with socialized or conventional labels, then the person doing the matching or connecting is the person doing the learning or meaning-making. The dominance of the teacher in the meaning making process would indicate that the teacher is doing the learning but, not necessarily the students. The problem is not limited to vocabulary lessons in English classes. Because language is part of every subject and permeates behavior in every classroom, the problem of conflicting meanings, one the result of an inner struggle to mean, the other the result of a struggle to understand preformed meanings delivered by teachers, is present in all classrooms in which the teacher dominates the language interaction.

Given the dominant language patterns which we described above, we suspect that conflicting meanings are often on the minds of students. That suspicion must be qualified: as long as teachers value student silence and limit student language to brief, fragmented comments, what is

really on the minds of students often remains a mystery.

Evidence of the conflict of meanings does at times surface in classroom language. For example, an excerpt from a twelfth grade science class lesson dealing with the half-life of radioactive materials illustrates a conflict between the students struggle for meaning and the teachers' attempt to explain meaningfully.

Student -- Why, uh... 1
Teacher -- Pardon? 2
Student -- Why half the life? 3
Teacher -- Why, why do we call it 'half-life'? 'Cause that's 4
the time it takes for half the material... 5
Students -- I know, but why not? 6
(Laughter) 7
Teacher -- Uh, that's a good question. Uh, why do we call a 8
banana 'a banana'...instead of calling it an apple? 9
(Laughter) 10
T -- Uh, I suppose for calculations, and so on. that this works 11
out, you know, conveniently. Quite often we come up with 12
formulas which we use more for convenience than anything else. 13

The student here is wondering about the arbitrariness of the label 'half-life'. The connection between decay and its temporal measurement is for her not a matter of convenience, as the teacher would have it, but one of difficulty. She has not made the connection for herself and seems reluctant to accept someone else's concept unquestioningly. What radioactive decay means to her is at odds with the conventional meaning for the

term 'half-live', which meaning she claims to understand when she says 'I know' (line 6). The teacher in this lesson is responding to the unasked question, namely, 'why do we name things?' and answers, 'for convenience'. Agreed upon names are applied to pieces of fruit or to pieces of physics to get on with knowing, or talking about, or communicating meaning. We think that what the student really wanted to know was how to make meaning for herself, how to get from particular percepts, from the sight of a piece of radioactive material and from the sound emitted by a geiger counter (both of which formed earlier parts of the lesson) to the making of the concept 'half-life'. One possible interpretation of the laughter is that her question was amusing because students here are unaccustomed to their peers vocalizing the struggle for meaning.

The teacher in the science lesson went on to give a lengthy example of a formula that "we use for convenience," and the student's question returned to the realm of her private thinking. In this tape, as in all of the tapes which we considered in our study of classroom lanaguage interaction, we noticed an emphasis on the social, conventional aspects of language, on meanings that students will just have to accept, not make for themselves. Where the personal or private aspect of language shows up on the tapes, that is, where individually relevant meaning becomes communicable through language, we almost always found the teacher, not students, talking. That, we believe, helps account for the familiar report in which teachers indicate that they really first learned their subjects when they had to teach them. Such learning is the result of talking their subjects through, of capturing private thinking in words and thus making those subjects meaningful for themselves.

Without the experience of talking the subject through, thought would

remain disconnected, detached from experience and perception, and therefore meaningless. Students need to make the subject meaningful for themselves by talking it through in much the same way the teacher does. Because the language behavior of the teacher is not normally permitted to students, and because there is often a conflict between personal attempts at meaning making by students and the dominating attempts at communicating meaning by teachers, what we see happening in student language in classrooms is what is described by Vygotsky in Thought and Language (Vygotsky, 1972) as a separation between the speech of a person and the subtext of that speech. What is said by students in classrooms may often bear very little resemblance to what the same students are really thinking and feeling. The socialized aspect of classroom language can become so dominant that the personal subtext may remain deeply hidden in the speech that is offered.

The struggle for meaning, however, is very personal. Meaning results when private sense perception, influenced by individual needs, emotions, and experiences, interacts with the social or conventional aspect of the word. More than any of the others, one of the classes we recorded illustrates that interaction of personal thought and social language. Notice that in the following excerpt the teacher has given over to students some of the control of language behavior, and as a result this English class vocabulary lesson is different than the one we looked at earlier. Significantly, we have had to include a longer portion of the transcript, because in this excerpt word meaning is being made, not just presented in a preformed package.

Teacher--O.K.? Right now we're going to be on page one-nineteen in the vocabulary. Again, we're going to do some of the French words that I think you really ought to know. These are words, uh, item six, terms dealing with history and government. O.K., there are about nine words there; we only need, we only need about four of these words. If you have a pencil, circle them off, o.k.? The first word is coup d'etat.

Student--Is 'coup' a word too?

T--Or coup, right. Or 'coo'. Notice, the final letter in a French word is not pronounced...

S--Why not?

T--If it's a consonant, in most of these words. Be sure that you look at the pronunciation underneath each word, because these are words that look different (!) than any others, O.K.? So, we have a coup d'etat, which is, notice, it's an illegal overthrow of a government; sudden, violent, or illegal. The example given in the book, 'Napoleon seeks power by a coup d'etat.' There are coups that take place in South American countries all the time.

S--What about South Africa, too?

T-- Uh, South Africa, there have been some.

S--But not as, not as...

T--No.

S__...frequent.

T--Right. You hear about it in, in South America all the time. Fidel Castro took over...

S--'Fiddle'

T--'Fiddle, fiddle,' right. He took over by a coup. O.K.? I don't expect you to remember how to spell it. I expect you to recognize it when your hear it. Steve?

S--In Cuba, right? They had, um, they have Fidel Castro's government right? Do they, don't they have another, you know, government, or is everything...

S--Everything's under him.

S--... Under him?

T--He is an absolute dictator.

Several students, and the teacher, talk at once.

Parts of this talk:

S--Why don't they shoot him?

T--He has taken over completely.

S--Is he a tyrant?

S--My name is Billy Walters.

T--O.K.....yeah?

S--(undecipherable question).

S--Yeah, twice wasn't it?

T--Sure, they did try.

S--Edgar Hoover

T--They tried to pull a coup on...

S--...I forgot what it was. The U.S.-Cuba boxing matches Sunday. Didn't he just walk into the arena, and, you know...

T--He's not afraid.

Several students talk at once.

T--It's an absolute dictatorship.

S--Yeah, but, some some poor...

T--People...

S--...citizen mighta shot him

T--I think, I bet they screened everybody, carefully. Nobody goes through the airport...

S--If somebody went in there a week before and hid a gun, somewhere, and they guy just walked in and...

T--I, the place was under surveillance. That's another French word, by the way--I bet that place was under surveillance for months.

S--(?) they coulda jumped out...

T--And they probably have, like the machines...When you go into an airport and they check you.

S--Metal, metal detectors.

T--I bet everybody was frisked out for metal objects. There's not that fear, like, like Kennedy, in Dallas. That never should of happened.

S--Cat's up on a roof.

T--Yeah, but I mean he shoulda been in a glass bubble. He shoulda been in a limousine with a glass bubble.

S--Yeah, but he was a celebrity, man.

T--Well, of course. And he wanted to be close to the people. Steve?

S--Another thing about that. Cuba, right. You see, they have all the black boxers and everything, right? All the boxers seem to be dark-skinned, black-skinned. Well, when I was looking up at the crowd, everybody seemed to be no more white, you know; I didn't see any spectators out there black, you know.

S--They all look white.

S--In Cuba, all the high society is mostly white.

T--Um-hum

S--That's 'cause...

T--There's an elite. Uh, I read an article in a magazine recently about Hawaii which was in answer to a letter by a black man who visited there, and there was something, 'If you're white, you're all right; if you're brown, stick around; if you're black stay back.' Uh, this happens in...

S--That's called 'school-yard.'

S--And if you're red, you're dead.

S--And if you're blue, you're cue. (?)

T--All right, I think somebody's trying to pull a coup in this class right now; we're digressing.

S--Hold it.

T--O.K. Let's get on. It's interesting because the words we're using are words that deal with government, and history, and we wound up disgressing into history and government.

In this excerpt the teacher establishes the frame of a structure but wants to allow her students to make meaning within it. Thus, she states that we will study words derived from the French, and coup d'etat, as defined by the book, is the starting point. Where to go from there is partially up to the students, and we go to Cuba and Castro, to Dallas and Kennedy, to violence and to assassination. One student brings us from relations between words to relations between people and races. Meaning is being made in this struggle: Steve is trying to turn his perception of black fighters and white spectators into a concept.

We have much more of the private thinking of students in this excerpt than in the others. Several students are trying to connect the concept 'coup d'etat; with their own experiences. At the same time, the tape suggests that guiding classroom talk and thought is a role students are not familiar with: they compete with each other to be heard, and some are led to silliness.

It is significant to note, though, that the teacher becomes anxious and returns to the role of providing meaning. She tries to make her personal perspectives and beliefs dominant, and in that attempt she makes the struggle to mean her own, and not her students'. She talks about Cuban security and jumps to Dallas, then to an article she has read recently. Later, she feels the need to make explicit the relation between the classroom talk and her intended lesson plan. She points out the connection between the words being studied and the classroom talk which she calls 'digression'. Finally, she brings the talk, the silliness, her anxiety, and the word being studied together: "I think somebody's trying to pull a coup in this class right now."

This excerpt illustrates the gap between the text of speech, the

the socially available meaning of what is said, and the subtext, the personally relevant meaning of the same words, in a way that is highly visible. In this class we can notice how the teacher's anxiety influences or interferes with her attempt to form a concept, one dealing with racial injustice and prejudice, which then gets in the way of the same attempt by a student. The teacher's discomfort may be caused by her not being fully prepared to give up some of the role of meaning maker and the control of the classroom that goes along with it. In this case, ironically, when the gap between subtext and text begins to close for students, when Jeff, for example, begins to match the word 'coup d'etat' with his personal experience, the gap gets wider for the teacher.

It is not an easy task for teachers to achieve an effective and appropriate balance between the personal subtext and the social text in classroom language. Two forces, one 'inner' and one 'outer', seem to work against the full interaction of private thought and public speech. The inner force is a matter of linguistic habit. Each of us does not have to invent language, but only learn or acquire it, and practice makes that task more habitual and automatic: the more we talk, the better we are at making lnaguage conventions express personal messages and purposes. Thus, we become increasingly inclined not to notice that the meaning of every word is a unification of subtext and text, of private perception and public conception. For teachers, this 'inner' influence leads to another habit, that of offering preformed meanings to students, since it is easier and less time consuming to do that than it is to permit students to struggle through making meaning for themselves. The catch is that the person with the most language experience, the teacher, gets even more experience with meaning meaning.

The 'outer' force, furthermore, reinforces that inner, habitual one. Since schooling is very much a process of socialization, we can expect the situational and cultural contexts of classroom language to again emphasize the social over the personal. We recognize that the pressures of large class sizes and of covering more material than the allotted time usually allows, together with pressures toward social norms governing behavior, are aspects of the conflict between the personal and the social that have to be considered by teachers. Still, we would caution that it is possible to attempt to develop the social and the civil, the acceptable and the standard, to such a degree that the personal becomes indiscernible. Students end up saying what they are supposed to say, not what they are really thinking.

The major implication of our work in investigating language and schooling is that teachers need to become more aware of the ways language is used in their classrooms. Because language behavior is habitual and fleeting, at times even unconscious, we need to slow it down and examine it. One way to do that is through the analysis of actual classroom language interaction, accompanied by the study of language theory to gain insight into the way meaning is made through the interaction and interpenetration of social language and personal thought.

It is a very difficult task for teachers to achieve an effective and appropriate balance between the personal and the social in the classroom. Still, the struggle to make meaning with language necessarily depends on that balance, for our students, as for us.

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